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## Johnstown's continuing wilderness legacy

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Imagine growing up on a farm in northern Somerset County, during the first quarter of the 20th century, and seeing Model Ts chatter along dirt roads over rolling farmland. Not all was bucolic, however: Lumbermen were clear-cutting the old-growth forests, and coal operators were ravaging parts of the landscape.

Then imagine establishing a career in Johnstown during the second quarter of the 20th century. While the community of 60,000-plus was booming, its days

often were darkened by a near-constant shroud of smoke and soot. Area forests were re-emerging, but much of the land was in private hands and not open to the public.

This was John Phillips Saylor's early life. He was born on a Conemaugh Township (Somerset County) farm in 1908 to parents who obviously were there as a lifestyle choice, since Saylor's father was a lawyer in Johnstown.

Saylor, himself, went to law school then returned to Johnstown, where he practiced until enlisting in the U.S. Navy during World War II. In 1949 he was elected to Congress and remained the 12th District's representative until his death in 1973.

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That Saylor was an advocate for the coal and steel interests within his congressional district should be no surprise. That Saylor also became one of Capitol Hill's strongest advocates for natural conservation and the environment might seem incongruous — until you consider his formative years.

Here in Pennsylvania, Saylor vainly opposed the development of the Kinzua Dam on the Allegheny River near Warren, questioning its cost and effectiveness as a flood-control dam, its potential destruction of river ecosystem and the fact that it would constitute a 10,000-acre land grab from the Seneca Nation, breaking a federal treaty dating to 1794.

In Washington he was more successful, co-authoring and co-sponsoring both The Wilderness Act of 1964 and the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. The Wilderness Act gives Congress the authority to designate appropriate tracts of public land as wilderness area for their preservation and protection. The Rivers Act provides similar authority for the protection of appropriate river sections.

Were Saylor still alive, he probably would be pleased that Congress designated 9,000 acres of the Allegheny National Forest (ANF) as wilderness in 1984 and added portions of the Allegheny River below the dam to the national Wild and Scenic Rivers system in 1992. (A portion of the Clarion River, an Allegheny tributary, was added in 1996.)

And he definitely would have been interested in a conversation I had recently with Joe Hardisky of the New Castle area. Joe is a member of the "Friends of Allegheny Wilderness" ([www.pawild.org](http://www.pawild.org)), a group working to get Congress to designate another 54,000 acres within the ANF as wilderness.

Added to the 9,000 acres already designated, the proposed wilderness area would protect 12 percent of the ANF from any development and preserve its natural state for future generations. Wilderness areas are open to the public for "non-mechanical" activities such as hiking, hunting, fishing and non-motorized boating.

While the designated area would not cost much to maintain — since that would be nature's job — the federal government does not own the mineral rights to most of this land, so there would be substantial compensation costs to the owners. Since those areas already are open to the public, why go for the added expense of wilderness designation?

"We're talking 150 years from now and beyond," Joe told me. "We don't know what that world's going to look like. But they will have this wilderness area to look at, to compare what things would have been if left to nature."

Clearly that was an important perspective to John Saylor. For here's what he had to say when he introduced the Wilderness Act in 1956: "We Americans are the people we are largely because we have had the influence of the wilderness on our lives."

*Dave Hurst loves to hear from readers. You can write to him at 913 Lina St., Johnstown, PA, 15902; or through [www.hurstmediaworks.com](http://www.hurstmediaworks.com).*